

## **Bl. Chavara, an Eminent Visionary Priest of 19<sup>th</sup> Century of Syro-Malabar Church**

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In this year dedicated to the renewal of priests I would like to present before the readers an eminent visionary priest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of Syro-Malabar Church who laid the foundation of the wonderful growth this Church has achieved now. It is unfortunate that even many leaders of this Church have only a very scanty knowledge about this illustrious son of the Syro-Malabar Church. It is to be admitted also that Chavara's congregation has not taken sufficient effort to make him known to the public. Chavara's priestly life and pastoral activities are sources of great inspiration to all priests.

### **1. A Profile**

Bl. Chavara was born on 10<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1805 as the youngest of the six children of Kuriakose Chavara and Mary Thoppil in Kainakari, in the Parish of Chennamkari in the present Arch-diocese of Changanacherry. At baptism he received the name Kurikose (Cyriac). The child had his early education at home itself especially in religious matters. As Chavara recalls in his work *Athmanathapam* (Compunction of Heart) his mother taught him in his very infancy the mysteries of faith and prayers like "Angelus", "Our Father", "Hail Mary", etc. His mother took him to the shrine of Our Lady at Vechoor and dedicated him to the Mother of God through the ministry of the priest. Year after year she took him to the shrine and renewed the dedication and brought him up as the servant of the Bl. Mother.

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At the age of five Kuriakose was sent to *Kalari* for primary education. There he learned Malayalam, Sanskrit, Arithmetic and Tamil. At the age of eleven Kuriakose felt called by God to priesthood. By the providence of God he met Malpan (=teacher or doctor) Fr. Thomas Palackal, the rector of Pallipuram Seminary. He was pleased with the boy and invited him to join his seminary. As a preparation to go to seminary his parents arranged for his stay at his parish presbytery for some time and there he assisted at the Holy Mass and other services.

At the age of thirteen, that is in 1818, Kuriakose entered the seminary at Pallipuram. During his seminary life, his parents and his only brother died due to an epidemic. Kuriakose was compelled by his relatives to return home because he was the only heir to the family property. But he withstood all compulsions and continued his study with a renewed dedication to his vocation. Under the fatherly care of Fr. Palackal, Kuriakose completed his seminary formation and was ordained priest on 29<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1829 in St. Andrew's Church at Arthumkal. Bl. Chavara celebrated his first Holy Mass in his parish church at Chennamkari on the first Sunday of Advent in Nov. 1829.

One of the important events after his ordination was the laying of the foundation stone for a religious institute - the realization of his long cherished desire - at Mannanam on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1831 together with Fr. Palackal and Fr. Thomas Porookara. Under the supervision of the religious community a seminary was started at Mannanam and Fr. Chavara was teaching there as well as at Pallipuram. After the death of Fr. Palackal in 1841 and that of Fr. Porookara in 1846, the whole responsibility of organizing and forming the religious community fell on the shoulders of Fr. Chavara.

In 1844 Fr. Chavara was raised to the position of Malpan by the Vicar Apostolic Francis Xavier. In the same year he started a printing press at Mannanam and a Sanskrit School in 1846.

On 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1855 Fr. Chavara made his religious profession at Mannanam taking the name Kuriakose Elias of Holy Family and accepted the profession of his ten companions. He was appointed the prior of the religious community "The Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel" and he continued to be the superior till his death in 1871. Fr. Chavara and his companions organized retreats and spiritual missions all over Kerala.

In 1861 Fr. Chavara was appointed the Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar church by Vicar Apostolic Bernard Baccinelli in which capacity he fought tooth and nail against Rochosian schism and

forced Rochos to return to his native place. Fr. Chavara tried to bring back the Churches fallen into the schism back to the Mother Church. He also tried to reform the Syro-Malabar liturgy.

In 1866 Fr. Chavara, in collaboration with Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD, founded a religious congregation for women at Coonammavu, which has now become divided into Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC) and Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC).

Fr. Chavara was also a writer. Besides the Chronicles, he has also written spiritual books, both in prose and poetry. All these have been recently published in four volumes under the title *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal* (CSK).

Fr. Chavara fell sick towards the end of 1870 and on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1871 he died and was buried in the Monastery Chapel at Coonammavu. In 1889 his mortal remains were transferred to St. Joseph Monastery, Mannanam, the Mother house of the CMI congregation. He was declared "Blessed" by Pope John Paul II on 8<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1986, together with St. Alphonsa at Kottayam.

## **2. Blessed Chavara on the Road to Priesthood.**

The ministerial priesthood holds a very important position in the life and growth of the Church. "The desired renewal of the whole Church depends in great part upon a priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ," says Second Vatican Council (*O.T.*, Introduction). Hence the importance of the formation of priests. The spiritual progress of the whole people of God depends in the highest degree on the ministry of priests. (This is supported by several papal documents as *Ad Catholic Sacerdotii* of Pope Pius XI, 'Mentic Nostrae' of Pope Pius XII etc.). There is an old saying: *Omne malum a clero et omne bonum a clero*, that is, all the evil is from the priest and all the good is from the priest. One who studies the history of the Church will find this double axiom verified. Chavara was a person who was convinced of the above ever valid principle and this conviction stayed with him all through his life. But before we enter into the priestly life of Bl. Chavara it will be useful to see how he prepared himself for priesthood. As mentioned above Chavara entered the seminary at the age of thirteen. It marked a growth in the awareness of his vocation. The information we get on Chavara's seminary life tells us that he lived it seriously with the goal of becoming a zealous priest. Under the direction of the rector Fr. Palackal he consciously and constantly tried to form himself to be another Christ, which a priest should be. His self-formation in the seminary can be viewed under three aspects:

Spiritual, intellectual and disciplinary. The most important among these is the spiritual aspect.

### 2.1. Spiritual Aspect

The necessity of holiness for the priests is something that the Church officially and unofficially and repeatedly brings to the attention of the priests (cf. *P.O.*, no. 12). Priestly ministry is not like any other job. It touches the very heart of the private and public life of the priest. If a priest wishes to serve his flock effectively, he must be a man of deep spiritual life, if their life does not burn upon the candlestick with a radiant and all conquering brilliance" ("Allocation to the Superiors of the Italian Seminaries," 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1961).

Deep spiritual life is *sine quanon* for a pastor of souls. As we go through Chavara's seminary life we see that he had really understood the necessity of priests being holy and he tried to form himself according to it. Almost all the elements which the present day Church considers important for a seminarian's spiritual formation are found in Chavara's seminary life. For example, the devotion to the Blessed sacrament. "Those who are to take the likeness of Christ, the priest by sacred ordination should form the habit of drawing close to him as friends in every detail of their lives" (cf. *O.T.* no. 8) Chavara tried to establish intimate friendship with the Lord in the Eucharist. Fr. Valerian CMI, one of Chavara's biographers, testifies to this fact (Cf. *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Elias Achan* (Malayalam), Mannanam, 1939, pp. 263-264). Chavara's Eucharistic devotion grew stronger as he advanced in years and found expression through words and deeds. The commencement of 40 hours adoration and the special divine office for the week after the "Corpus Christi" testify to the deep devotion he had for the Eucharist.

Another thing which every seminarian and priest should cultivate in himself is the devotion to the Mother of God (cf. *O.T.* no. 8). As already pointed out, the devotion to the Bl. Virgin was sworn in Chavara even when he was a child. He had deep filial devotion to her, especially because he had been dedicated to her. He practiced it during his seminary life. Fr. Valerian writes: "He considered it his duty to attract his classmates to the feet of the Mother through example and conversation. He was known as a special apostle of the Mother in his seminary life (op. cit. p. 278). His love and devotion to the Mother find their best expression in his work *Athmanuthapam*. Fr. Leopold Beccaro also speaks on Chavara's devotion to the Mother of God as follows: "His love for the Virgin Mother was filial. He spoke eloquently of her glories and tried to

inculcate this devotion in the hearts of others" (*A Short Biography of the Venerable Person who Wrote this Pious Colloquy* (Malayalam) Coonammavu, 1871, p. ix)

Chavara also tried to practice various virtues so that he might become a shepherd according to the heart of the Good Shepherd. He was marked for his piety, desertion, patience and charity. Fr. Leopold praises his God-fearing habits, detachment from worldly achievements, the spirit of service, pleasant and charitable disposition to his fellow seminarians and the remarkable patience, unusual among the young people (cf. *ibid.* p.1)

Chavara chose as his motto "The Lord is my Portion" (Ps. 16:15), when he received tonsure in 1818 (cf. Valerian, *op. cit.* p.26). He stood by this motto even at the time of his great trial, that is, at the time of parents' death. Fr. Valerian says, "His most important concern was to become a true servant of Christ" (*Ibid.* p.28).

Here we also like to mention that Chavara had a deep love for the Church which the Church wishes to find in every candidate to priesthood (cf. *O.T.* no.9). It is true that nobody speaks about his love for the Church while discussing his seminary life. But we find in his later life this love expressed in his great concern for the well-being of the local Church as well as the universal Church and in his humble and filial attachment to the vicar of Christ and loyal co-operation into the hierarchy. Certainly this ardent devotion to and love for the Church might have originated and begun to grow during his seminary life.

Prayer life which is essential for spiritual growth was also diligently fostered by Chavara. He was very faithful to his daily spiritual duties and through prayer he always tried to keep himself close to the Lord. The spirit of prayer that his mother instilled in his childhood gradually grew during his seminary life.

Chavara's zeal and interest in praying the divine office deserves special mention. The prayers of the divine office were long and manuscript copies were few in Malabar. Consequently, the custom of praying the divine office had practically ceased to exist even among the priests at that time. In this situation Chavara tried to prepare a breviary for his own personal use with the permission of the rector. Fr. Kuriakose Porukara says:

"The custom from ancient times of praying the divine office of week days and feast days had almost ceased to exist. Kuriakose with the permission of his 'Malpan' collected books of divine office from different places and wrote them down with great effort. He

also paid attention to the rubrics of recitation". (*Kuriakose Porukara, short Biography of our Most Rev. Fr. Prior of Monasteries of the Third Order of Discalced of Carmelities* (Malayalam), p.33)

## 2.2. Intellectual Aspect

The first essential thing a priest should have is a genuine spiritual life. The second essential thing required of a priest is that he must be a man of knowledge. As the priest is to lead the people in the ways of God he must have a deep knowledge of sacred sciences and the mysteries of salvation. Seminary is the place where the seminarians are supposed to enrich themselves with such knowledge.

When we examine Chavara's seminary life we find that he had a deep awareness of the necessity of priests being men of knowledge, and he tried his level best to equip himself with the necessary knowledge for his future ministry. Fr. Leopold writes: "After this (the reception of tonsure), our young cleric understood that priests lacking in learning are not only useless for others, but also can be the cause of their eternal death. Therefore, from the reception of tonsure on he tried to become a minister of God through diligent and intense study" (Op. cit. p.11). From this it is very clear that his seminary studies were entirely motivated with pastoral vision.

Chavara was such a promising student that the rector selected him for further studies in Latin and Portuguese languages in other places. It is to be also noted that in the first years of his seminary life he learned the liturgical language - Syriac very well (Valerian, op.cit., p.31). This knowledge stood him in good stead when it came to the compilation of canonical offices later. Fr. Palackal made strenuous and earnest effort to provide his disciples with the maximum knowledge available at that time in sacred sciences and Chavara co-operated with him whole-heartedly.

## 2.3. Disciplinary Aspect

The third important thing expected of a seminarian as well as of a priest is discipline which is essential for living in conformity with the crucified Christ and for giving up willingly even those things which are lawful but not expedient' (*O.T.* no. 9). Every seminary necessarily calls for disciplinary rules aimed at forming the seminarians into other Christs. The Seminary at Pallippuram was no exception to this; rather its disciplinary rules were stricter. Chavara observed the disciplinary rules with such readiness and perfection that he never required a correction. Fr. Porukara writes about Chavara's seminary life as follows:

His life in Seminary is admitted to have been very exemplary by all his colleagues. His devotion, obedience and charity were outstandingly impressive. The seminary was a new one and the discipline enforced was particularly strict. Yet, throughout the rather long period of training, there was no instance of his having been reproved for even the slightest offence." (op. cit., p.32).

All these things point to the fact that Chavara underwent the seminary training with a definite goal, namely, to become a good shepherd after the Good Shepherd. He wished to become an effective instrument in the hands of God, spiritually and intellectually, in order to be able to help others to reach God.

### **3. Blessed Chavara's Priestly Life**

After eleven years of seminary formation Chavara became a representative of Christ in 1829 by receiving the Holy ordination. Even after becoming a priest, Chavara was fully conscious of his identity as a priest. It is this consciousness that sustained him to live as a true representative of Christ till his death. In a retreat note on vocation he asks the question, for what purpose he was called by God, leaving his parents, friends and possessions. He answers the question as follows: "It is to follow him in his footsteps, to save from sin his soul and those of others redeemed by his precious blood, to do virtues and to make others do them" (CSK, vol. III, p.50). We see here the essence of priestly ministry, that is, to follow Christ closely and to save others. This is what Chavara did in his life through various activities. He was prepared to risk his own life to save a soul. When he was in charge of the church at Pallippuram he was called to administer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick who was about to die due to smallpox. Some people dissuaded him from going fearing that his life too might be in danger. But Chavara said, "This is my duty; God will help," and he went. By the time he started his priestly ministry, he was a man of God, a great friend of the Eucharistic Jesus, a man of prayer, an ardent devotee of Bl. Mother and zealous for the well-being of the people of God.

Now let us have a look into Chavara's pastoral activities for the all-round well-being of his flock. When we consider Chavara's pastoral activities, what strikes us most is his profound vision, farsightedness and his adventurous spirit. "It might be his God experience that gave him this prophetic vision. We can see several milestones of this vision making his priestly career. He had an extraordinary ability to see God's hand in the signs and needs of the time and the readiness to follow them. They were for him

inspirations of God. Hence he was very diligent to act according to them. It was Chavara's farsightedness that worked behind the many achievements which the Malabar Church has today" (Fr. Thomas Aykara, Radio Talk (Vatican), May 1983). He was not a priest who tried to remain satisfied with the usual priestly duties like offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice, hearing confession etc. He was a pastor who initiated with imagination and foresight several projects in spiritual, educational, cultural, and social fields for the progress of the Malabar Church (Here we do not forget the role of the co-founders of the CMI congregation Fr. Thomas Palackal and Fr. Thomas Porukara). The two religious congregations, one for men (CMI) and another for women, (as mentioned above, the Congregation for women is at present known as CMC - belonging to the Syro-Malabar rite and CTC - belonging to the Latin rite) the seminaries, the schools, the printing press and the house for the destitute - all these are the results of Chavara's broad vision and adventurous efforts. What Chavara and his colleagues mainly aimed at was the spiritual and moral renewal of the Catholic community. They could diagnose the sickness and weakness of the community and treat them with effective means. It is also to be noted that these were not temporary but long standing and expected to become more and more effective in course of time.

Among the various pastoral projects Chavara and the Co-founders initiated, the most important is the foundation of the above mentioned two religious congregations. The motive behind the foundation of CMI community was to provide for priests with facilities to do many good things for the spiritual welfare of the people. "Both (Fr. Palackal and Fr. Porukara) seeing that a lot of good things has not been done due to the absence of a religious house (*Thapasu Bhavanam*) at least for the priests, were vehemently desiring to start a monastery for the priests" (CSK, Vol. I, p.1). Chavara also shared this view of the above mentioned priests which is clear from Chavara's writings. The founding of the religious institute at Mannanam on May 11, 1831 was the beginning of a great spiritual movement that changed the Malabar Church in all aspects. The foundation of the congregation for women also has done a lot for the well-being of the people of God both in Kerala and outside Kerala. With regard to the importance of these two congregations Prof. Thomas P.T. writes:

The greatest achievement of Chavara is the foundation of two religious congregations in Kerala for the first time: the Carmelite Congregation of Mary Immaculate for men and the Carmelite Congregation for women. The for men is the first indigenous congregation of Bharatha (India)



with official recognition and vows. These plants have grown and branched into two big trees by these hundred years and remain in such a way as to give shade not only to the small Kerala but even to the large India. It is not easy to evaluate the services of these two congregations which started with simple life of prayer and penance, in the field of education, culture, publication, mission and for the uplift of the poor. The growth and development which these congregations have achieved are something that reminds us of the growth of the mustard seed in the gospel ("Chavara, a Saint" (Malayalam) in *Chavara Charama Sadabdi*, 1871-1971, pp.18-19).

Another project that sprang up from Chavara's and his colleagues' prophetic vision for the renewal of the catholic community was the establishment of a seminary attached to the Mananam monastery. "Realizing that the good future of the Kerala Church lies in well disciplined priests, the founding fathers established a seminary at Mananam" (Joseph M.O. Nedumkunnam, "Chavara and the Religious congregation of Mary Immaculate" (Malayalam) in *Chavara Charamasadabdi*, 1871-1971, p.6).

Chavara and the co-founders realized that the spiritual poverty of the Malabar Catholics was due to the lack of properly trained priests. They believed that if learned and virtuous priests were trained, the community also would be renewed and the Church also would grow. The seminary at Mannanam was the first public seminary established for the Syro-Malabar Church. The reputation of this seminary inspired the vicar Apostolic Baccinelli to ask Chavara to start similar seminaries attached to other monasteries as well. Dharmaram College, the major Seminary of CMI congregation is the descendant of Mananam seminary. One of the biographers of Chavara writes: "Catholic Malabar has all along enjoyed the fruits of the loyal and steady series of Fr. Kuriakose (Chavara) in preparing labourers for the vineyard of our Lord. The service the Carmelite seminaries have rendered to the Church in Malabar is gratefully appreciated and remembered to this day" (Chacko K.C., *Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mananam, 1959, p.45).

Spiritual exercises for priests and the renovation of Syro-Malabar liturgy were two other means which Chavara used for making the priests of the Syro-Malabar Church spiritually enriched. His contribution to the liturgy is something which the Syro-Malabar Church can never forget. Chavara touched and reshaped almost every liturgical celebration of this Church. It is through strenuous efforts that he brought order in the liturgy especially in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and the divine office. (There is

an accusation that Chavara Latinized the Syro-Malabar liturgy. It is true that he took several things from the Latin rite with the permission of the vicar Apostolic. But in evaluating this, we have to take into account the liturgical situation in Malabar Church at Chavara's time, his motivation in adopting something from the Latin rite and Chavara's real concern for his own rite which is expressed in his writings. (See for details, Joseph Kanjiramattathil, *The pastoral vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 1986, pp.110-111, 44-52)

Another effective means which Chavara made use of for the spiritual awakening of the Malabar Catholic community was the proclamation of the word of God in different forms such as sermons and spiritual exercises (retreats). He was a shepherd who was fully convinced of his duty to feed the flock with the word of God. Preaching retreats in parishes was not a practice in Malabar at that time. It was an innovation of Chavara and his colleagues and the result was very long. It is also one of their great contributions to the spiritual life of the Malabar Church.

This mission veritably began to renew the face of Malabar and immensely contributed to make it what it is today. Their sanctity gave unfailing efficacy to their words. Some of them were asked to preach the word of God at any time they happened to arrive in a Church. People gathered at the ringing of the bells. They listened with rapt attention to the inspiring sermons of the fathers" (Placid, Bartholomeo, Romeo, *The Carmelite Congregation of Malabar 1831-1931*, Mannanam, p. 35).

Chavara exhorted the priests to preach sermons during Sunday masses and did much to make this regular practice in all Churches. He himself preached in almost all the churches of Malabar. People crowded when he preached.

Chavara's Creative spirit was not confined to the spiritual field but extended to the cultural, educational and social fields. He realized that an illiterate and intellectually poor community would not progress. He also foresaw the disadvantages the catholic community would have to suffer due to the lack of education. Therefore he started a Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846. This marked the beginning of catholic education in Kerala. Some authors believe that if Chavara's followers had continued to take the same interest as Chavara did in the development of Sanskrit and Malayalam, the Catholics would have gained the cultural leadership in Malabar and the Christian values could have influenced the literary and cultural fields and there would have

been many catholic scholars in these languages. (Thomas P.T., *Karmayogi* (Malayalam) p.148).

Besides this, when Chavara was Vicar general, he tried to start schools adjoining to every parish for the faith formation of the catholic children. It is to be specially mentioned that he started two schools (Sunday Schools) for the new converts (Harijans). Chavara gave schools an importance almost equal to that of Churches. Professor Thomas P.T. says. "It is due to the result of Chavara's courageous actions that the Catholics who were so low in educational level about hundred years ago have reached the present envious position. It is doubtful whether there was any other community leader who had so deeply understood the fundamental importance of schools" (Thomas P.T., *ibid.*, p. 149). The followers of Chavara have been very earnest in following him in the field of education. Now the congregation has become an important agency of education in Kerala and other mission areas.

Another creative venture of Chavara was, the starting of a printing press at Mannanam in 1844. The influence of the press and publication in the life of man for good and evil needs no explanation. Realizing the importance of the communication media Second Vatican Council has issued a special document under the title "Decree on the Means of social communication" (*Inter mirifica*). The Church urges both the pastors and laymen to be particularly zealous in this field since it is closely linked with the task of preaching the gospel (*Inter mirifica*, nos. 13,15).

According to some authors, Chavara's greatest service to the Kerala Church is the establishment of the press. Professor Mathew Ulakamthara says: "If you ask me, what is Chavara's most valuable service to the Kerala Church, I will say that it is the establishment of St. Joseph's Press of Mannanam" ("The first Kerala Apostle of the Press," in *Chavara Charama sadabdi 1871-1971*, p.44). Another writer is also of the same opinion. "The most far reaching, illuminating, edifying and even sanctifying field of activity initiated by Fr. Kuriakose through the monasteries in general and primarily from Mannanam was that of printing" (Chacko K.C., *op. cit.*, p.97). The numerous books that have been published from this press and other presses of Chavara's congregation pertaining to the various aspects of Christian life have been answering to the spiritual, intellectual and cultural quests and aspirations of the catholic community for the last 162 years. It is that "primitive" press that put the first Malayalam prayer book *Jnana peeyoosham* (=spiritual nectar) into the hands of the Malabar Catholics. The several weeklies, monthlies of the catholic community of Kerala

have their origin from the monthly *Karmala Kusumam* started in 1902 and the daily *Nazrani Deepika* now known as *Rashtra Deepika* started on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1887 from the Mannanam St. Joseph's Press.

Viewed against the background of the most efficient automatic presses of the present day, Chavara's wooden press may look insignificant. But we come to realize its greatness when we consider the situation in which Chavara made it and the extent of his vision. In spite of all the insurmountable difficulties, his daring pastoral spirit and vision pushed him to embark on the project and he did succeed. He foresaw how this would be helpful to the spiritual and the cultural advancement of the Catholics. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the insight Chavara exhibited in taking this step about 162 years ago is almost equal to that of Second Vatican Council regarding the communication media. With the establishment of the press he laid the foundation of the apostolate of the press of the Catholic community of Kerala.

Chavara's contributions to the social field is also revolutionary and unforgettable. It is true that he did not do any social work on a grand scale. But the little things he did are great when viewed against the background of that period and the fruits they have produced in the passage of time. One of the revolutionary steps he took in this field was the establishment of an asylum (*Upavisala*) for the destitutes at Kainakari with the help of his parishioners. Such an institution was something unheard of in Malabar. It was meant for the poor and the destitute, irrespective of caste and creed. With the establishment of this house of charity, he was, in fact awakening his catholic community to their duty of taking care of their unfortunate and forsaken brother and was also laying the foundation of the works of mercy of the Catholic community as well as of others. The many centers of the works of mercy run by the Christian community in Kerala and outside have their origin in the *Upavisala* at Kainakari. "It is to be remembered that it is Chavara who laid the foundation of *Dharmasalas* (=Houses of Charity) that are seen through the length and width of Kerala" (Thomas P.T., "Chavara: a Saint" in *Chavara Charama Sadabdi 1871-1971*, p.21).

A second revolutionary step was the uplift of the low caste (Harijans) and their evangelization. His faith in the equality of the children of God urged him to work for the betterment of the depressed class wise *Pulayar* and their conversion. It was a time when these people were considered slaves by the Catholics as well as the Hindus. As I have mentioned he started two schools for them, one at Mannanam and another at Arpookara. He wished

to enlighten them spiritually and intellectually. "If most of the Harijans (here, *pulayar*) are now socially, culturally and economically well-off, the credit goes to Chavara." (Joseph Chirayil, "Chavara, the Social Worker" in *Chavara Charma Sadabdi 1871-1971*, p.171).

In starting a house for the destitute, in establishing schools for the outcaste and providing them with food and clothes and in helping the other poor people, Chavara was showing the special concern, love and care which a good shepherd is expected to show towards his weak and poor sheep (P.O. no. 6, C.D. no. 30). He had in fact imbibed the spirit of the good shepherd who had a special concern for the poor and the afflicted.

Another great achievement of Chavara and one of his greatest service to the Syro-Malabar Church is the saving of the Church from falling completely into the Rochosian schism. Chavara was a great champion of faith. Had it not been for Chavara's strong resistance, the Malabar Church would have had a different history. "If Chavara had not taught for the Church and led the people along the path of truth, the face of the Church in Kerala might not have been what it is at present, In a sense, we have to call him the saviour of Kerala Syrian Church" (*Centenary of a Holy Death 1871-1971*, Mannanam, 1971, p.3).

Joseph M.O. Nedumkunnam refers to Chavara's service as follows: "The greatness of Chavara's service we come to realize only when we know the fact that the whole Kerala Church would have fallen into the Rochosian Schism had it not been for his and his confrères' constant efforts" (cf. *Chavara Charama Sadabdi*, p.12).

It was during the struggle against Rochorian schism that Chavara's pastoral spirit and vision expressed itself at its best. As a good Shepherd who would try to protect the flock even from the foreseeable dangers, Chavara cautioned this flock of the intruder Rochos through a very appealing pastoral letter. After the arrival of Rochos, together with his colleagues and lay leaders he left no stone unturned to keep the flock together. His repeated appeal to the Holy Father and to other ecclesiastical authorities to intervene in the problem and to forbid Rochos from exercising jurisdiction over the Malabar Church, to give correct information on the claims of Rochos and his preaching against Rochos throughout Malabar, etc. Manifest the intense anxiety he had for the salvation of his flock and for the unity of the Church. He was ready to risk his life for it. His appointment as the vicar general during that troubled time and Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli's recommendation to consecrate him as auxiliary bishop were an official recognition of

Chavara's pastoral qualities as leadership, service, courage, holiness, especially the zeal for the salvation of his flock. His efforts to bring back the dissident Churches back to unity with the Church after schism and his kind dealings with his opponents Rochoss and Thondanat add brilliance to his priestly qualities. Chavara's perfect obedience to and the whole hearted co-operation with the ecclesiastical authorities and his love and concern for the universal Church also go to prove that he was an eminent priest in every aspect, a priest who was truly faithful to the High priest, Jesus.

#### **4. Relevance of Blessed Chavara's Life for the Present**

Some may ask, what is the relevance of Bl. Chavara who lived about 140 years back for the present? In general, we can say that the life of the holy men is an inspiration for all times for men of good will. Chavara was a holy man. With regard to Bl. Chavara in particular, he is a very great inspiration, a model for any priest whether religious or diocesan for all times. As pointed out, he was a priest, a pastor, a shepherd who very closely followed the footsteps of the High Priest, the supreme Pastor, the Good shepherd and spent all his time, energy and talents for the welfare of his flock, his Church, and learned like prophet Eliah with the zeal for God, and for the salvation of people. Is this not what every priest should be? He was a person who was 100% conscious of his priestly identity which is often lacking in different degrees in many of the priests of the present day. This leads to laxity in priestly life and consequent misdeeds. If a priest is a man of God, vision and imagination like Chavara he will be able to do a lot for the welfare of his parish community.

Blessed Chavara is a very inspiring example not only for the priests but also for those who are preparing for priesthood - the seminarians. As I have already pointed out, seminarians have a lot to learn from Blessed Chavara's seminary life. I would like to end this article with the words of the servant of God Mar Mathew Kavukatt: "The life of Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a monk of extraordinary sanctity, a man of dynamic personality with broad vision and powerful push and unabating pluck, ever remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration to all those who care to look at it." (In Chacko K.C., op. cit., Forward).